

# Hilda Erickson

## Midwife and Toothaches

Hilda's Jar-O-Teeth



Jar-O-Teeth!

The jar of teeth (pictured left) were extracted from a series of patients by the Utah pioneer, Hilda Erikson, born Andersson. One of her many careers in her long life was being an amateur dentist. She was also a seamstress, midwife, merchant, rancher, Democratic candidate for Senate, Primary President, traveler, and lived to be the longest surviving pioneer. Hilda's life and careers

illustrate the unique struggles faced by pioneer women as well as their unique strengths. Beyond the basic and pressing quotidian battle for survival all pioneers confronted in the Utah Territory, women were required to raise children, run homes when food and shelter were scarce, as well complete all other tasks necessary.

Hilda was born in the small town of Ledsjö, Sweden, on November 11, 1859. When she was four years old, her parents, Maria Kathrina Larsson and Pehr Andersson, converted to the LDS Church. In her diary she described her parents as “poor but honest,” who taught her how to “work hard for a living.”<sup>[1]</sup> Three years later, they decided to follow the advice of Brigham Young, traveling almost 7,000 miles to reach the Utah Territory, where they lived humbly on a homestead in Grantsville.

After a long courtship, Hilda married John August Erickson in Salt Lake City on February 23, 1882. He too was a Swedish immigrant. Soon after their wedding, they were called to a mission near the Nevada border to convert the Goshute Indians. They remained there for the next fifteen years. Hilda devoted her life to the Church and to serving the LDS community, taking on new occupations as needed. When midwives were rare, she took on this duty, riding sidesaddle through the desert to deliver babies.



Hilda in her younger days  
*Courtesy of the Utah Historical Society*

The early twentieth century invention of the automobile sparked Hilda’s interest. Between 1908 and 1953, she burned through eleven cars and only stopped driving at the age of 94 because the state revoked her license.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1964, Hilda became the last surviving pioneer, and lived on for four more years. In her lifetime, she witnessed the world transform. She watched Utah gain statehood, the invention of electricity, radio, telephone, automobile, television, and the airplane; she watched the “closing of the frontier,”<sup>[3]</sup> the colonization of what would become the Third World and the beginnings of decolonization, both World Wars, the emergence of the Cold War, the Korean War, and much of Vietnam.

In the early 1960s, Hilda herself donated this jar to the Pioneer Memorial Museum. It is on the first floor, displayed alongside other artifacts from her life. The former owners of the miscellaneous teeth remain unknown. But, it is said that Hilda was celebrated for her fearless, in-the-field dentistry, “Hilda became known as the ‘Dentist.’ Once she met men along the roadway; one had a very bad toothache, so there and then she extracted the tooth and went on her way— just an ordinary occurrence, in an ordinary day.”<sup>[4]</sup>



At age 104

*Courtesy of the Utah Historical Society*

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<sup>[1]</sup> Kate B. Carter, “Hilda Erikson–Pioneer” in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 73-112. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1963), 82.

<sup>[2]</sup> Becky Bartholomew, “A Midwife and More” *Utah State History*, <http://www.ilovehistory.utah.gov/people/difference/erickson.html>

<sup>[3]</sup> The purported “closing of the frontier” occurred in 1890 following the Massacre at Wounded Knee. The Native Americans were then deemed “subdued,” the Wild West “conquered,” and Manifest Destiny “complete.”

<sup>[4]</sup> Carter, 98.

## Bibliography

Bartholomew, Becky. "A Midwife and More." *Utah State History*.  
<http://www.ilovehistory.utah.gov/people/difference/erickson.html>

Carter, Kate B. "Hilda Erikson—Pioneer." In *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 73-112. Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1963.